



Ask The Coach

By Scott Chesney

The Other Side of Suicide

Do you know what I love most about writing this column for Action, coaching and speaking to people from all walks of life, and even just connecting with random human beings when pushing down the street? We are all unique, we all have an opinion, and we truly must respect the opinions of others. In my last column, Marylyn Schwartz gave us a unique and heartfelt perspective on her son Clay's battle with paralysis and his eventual death from committing suicide. Today I want to give you an opposite viewpoint on the topic of suicide and a reaction to Ms. Schwartz's story. Again, I don't condone nor do I condemn these words, but do find them to be a heartfelt perspective. As I have always shared with you, my readers, and my audiences worldwide, when you speak, write, or operate in any way from your heart, you can never go wrong. Thank you Marylyn and now, John, for writing from your heart and helping us to gain even more insight and leverage on this serious and most important topic of suicide.

Scott,

I've thought of writing you on at least two other occasions – after reading your piece on how we celebrate/acknowledge our respective accident anniversaries, and more recently, after reading your piece on whether hoping for a cure for paralysis is beneficial or detrimental. As a brief aside, this past January, I noted my tenth “Slow down and be careful day,” a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgement of what I should have done that January Sunday back in 2000 on a ski slope. And on the hope thing, I guess hoping for a cure is fine, just as long as it doesn't serve as a substitute for the injured party's dealing with the awful reality of their new situation and prevent them from preparing themselves to move on with their very different life.

But I digress...

The piece you shared from the mother of your

friend, Clay, was powerful. Like Clay, I was 30 at the time of my injury and was roughly six months away from leaving my full time job as a Market Researcher for a medical device manufacturer to become a full time flight instructor. In fact, exactly one month to the day before my skiing accident, I passed the check ride that added single engine commercial privileges to my multi-engine commercial instrument pilot's license. My plan had me completing my CFI in six months, teaching for a year to build time, sliding into the right seat at a regional carrier by the time I hit 32, moving over to the captain's seat by 34, and getting on with a major airline by 36. The EMTs didn't even have the back board in place before I realized all of that was gone. In an instant, I lost my very identity. I was no longer C. John the ski instructor, C. John the bike racer, C. John the inline speed skater or C. John the soon-to-be airline pilot. Instead, because I had recently spent a good bit of time on a clinical research team looking at a device for the treatment of chronic wounds, I had a pretty good idea of what was in store for me: urinary and fecal incontinence, a life devoid of orgasms, and a future filled with handi-vans instead of European sport sedans.

Essentially, sadly, it's a take on the same story you've probably heard many, many times, and perhaps even experienced yourself following your stroke. After spending three weeks at the Mayo Clinic, five weeks at a skilled nursing facility and another four in an inpatient rehab facility, I found myself living with my parents at age 30, with no girlfriend, no sense of how I was ever going to make anything of my life, and no comprehension of who would ever want me like this.

I could only imagine how my condition and my outlook made my parents feel. That's why, to this day, I don't ever think I personally let them know that for every day for probably six months after arriving at their house, I found myself wishing that the EMTs and the ER docs hadn't done such a good job resuscitating me. In spite of all the depression I was suffering, I knew they were suffering, too. And all of the larger

universal, moral, “heaven or hell” questions aside, it was my thinking about what my suicide would do to my parents and other family and friends that loved me that led me to the conclusion that I simply could not be that selfish. In a weird way, that realization actually added a bit of resentment to my depression—as in, “Great. They’ll still have their son, but I’m the one that has to live this terrible life.” And ultimately, that’s where I come down after reading the letter you published. People who find themselves in that situation need to think, among other things, about how taking their own life could perhaps irreparably harm those that love them the most.

Now, I consider myself fairly lucky. I’m a T-12 complete, with nothing in the way of spasticity, and very little in the way of incontinence. And in that sense, I think it would be hard for me to judge someone with a higher level of injury or who essentially has it medically worse off than I do. Nevertheless, if I ever found myself in the position of having to try to counsel somebody who’s wrestling with the suicide question, I’d like to think I’d do my best to bring them to the same conclusion at which I arrived—it’s just too selfish a thing to do to those who love you and that you’ll be leaving behind. Further, there’s the argument of, “You have NO way of possibly knowing right now what good things life may have in store for you.” In my case, I went back to that job I was previously prepared to leave and found a sense of fulfillment in making a contribution—and importantly, a contribution by nondisabled standards. I went on to discover the overwhelming healing power of dogs. That’s a whole ‘nother story, but suffice it to say that Sam, my dog, not only got me through the scary, peak and valley experience of internet dating from a wheelchair, but he inspired me to develop a device that ultimately led me to leave my job in order to try to start my own business. But most importantly, he got me to the woman that would become my wife. Sam died just three weeks before our wedding in June of 2008, but he hung on to get me to that next great phase of my life, a phase I would never have realized if the EMTs and ER docs hadn’t been so “on their game.”

Well, I initially intended this to be a quickie kind of e-mail just to let you know that I frequently read your column and that I enjoy it. I guess I shared a bit more than I thought I was going to. In any event, I hope that something I’ve written strikes a chord with you, and that you may be able to use that something

to go on to help somebody else that tragically finds themselves in the dark place I found myself.

Keep writing and fighting the good fight,
C. John Stanchina

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